

I never wanted to get married. More so, I never wanted to marry him.

Picture it: April 2006. He kneels down in front of me. It's drizzling slightly. I cup his face with my hands as eager eyes stare a hole through my skull. This is his 3rd proposal. I rejected the last two, sharing with him that I wasn't ready and hoping by letting him down gently, we could still navigate what's left of this partnership. Yet here he is again, perhaps thinking bracing down on both knees this time would prove to me he's solid, he's willing, he's ready. Before my brain had time to compute, I say yes. There is no ring. I end up buying my own. I was 19, overchurched and religious to a fault. We left that park hand-in-hand with me convincing myself through a strained smile that I made the right decision.

Leading up to this point, I was figuring out my life as a whole. In a new city learning the ropes of Adulthood Lite™, I had no self-identity besides who God saw me to be. That girl I didn't understand or recognize but I tried to work through it as best I could. I was with a man who recently punched a hole in a wall during an argument. I wanted him to leave, but I found myself always begging him to stay. We lived together with no sex outside oral sex a couple of times and my church spirit felt terrible. Sharing with his friends that we weren't having sex because I was waiting for marriage, the proposals came more often. Looking back, I see I truly wasn't waiting for marriage but the right person. The right person, he was not. The levels of learned helplessness I'd gleaned from my emotionally abusive childhood home, convinced me that this was the best I could do. I made vows. It was all a blur until my wedding night.

I bought my lingerie at Burlington because I was a broke college student. I prepared myself to lose my virginity, with the understanding that virginity is a social/patriarchal construct, being years ahead of me. My then-husband does all the things we're told are supposed to amount to foreplay, yet my body was not having it. She knows more than I that this is wrong, and in protection, she seals shut, not allowing him (or anything) inside. We keep trying while I attempt to be the good wife on the wedding night I never imagined. Him growing concerned, me dissociating. The next day I'm in the emergency room being told by a white, male ER doc that I need to "figure this out" because if he can't find pleasure here, he'll find it elsewhere. I sat with a sheet dejected and exposed, left to my own devices on how to fix me. How did I get here? How do many of us get here: a space with a person neither our hearts or bodies want? What do we do when our bodies reject the thing we're told it's made to experience?

Months later in a semi-sexless marriage pulling at any straw I can grasp, I lay in physical therapy, a recommendation from my then-OB-GYN. I'm on that table, crying. Confused. Lashing out at my body every chance I get. Magazines that promise to make him worship me face me mockingly in the checkout line. My saving grace is my physical therapist - a black woman who greets me every session with a huge smile and reassurance that today will be better than the last session. We chat like what's happening is normal. She soothes my anxiety by

informing me that it's more normal than I think. She makes a point to look me in my eyes as she delivers my diagnosis: Vaginismus. According to [medicalnewstoday.com](http://medicalnewstoday.com), Vaginismus is defined as "a condition involving a muscle spasm in the pelvic floor muscles. It can make it painful, difficult, or impossible to have sexual intercourse, to undergo a gynecological exam, and to insert a tampon". Being no stranger to cognitive behavioral therapy at this point, I go back to sitting on a flattened couch cushion sharing about being molested from ages 8-10. I remember how tight my chest was as the words pour from my mouth as whispers, thinking that maybe if my ears don't hear them, it can't be true. Unbeknownst to me, the tightness of my chest had spread to the rest of my body and had manifested as a vagina on permafrost. One day we'll talk about "vice grips" and the roles they play in conventional sexuality and porn. One day we'll talk about tightness in multitudes. It can be thanks to Kegels It can also be informed by trauma. One is voluntary, the other not so. I sat on the table with an answer. This thing wasn't because I was broken, but because my body didn't want me to be. "What do I do now?", I managed to push out with my back against the exam room wall for support. "Take your time and learn your body", she said lovingly.

### **A Sexual Revolution Redux**

Now at my big age of 32, having been divorced over six years with an 11-year-old daughter on the verge of puberty, I've come to realize all I've ever known about sex has been wrong. I grew up Baptist. In church multiple days a week, too-big choir robe, lily-white gloves on the hands of elder women who would just as quickly call you fast as to tell you the Lord loves you Baptist. My sense of sexuality was baked into stories of Ruth and Boaz with casual glimpses over into the Song of Solomon. I was always a curious child, needing to know why things did what they did. The hows and whys colored my experiences, even the traumatic ones. Being molested by a male family member projected onto me that attraction and intimacy are only offered under duress; under confusion. When boundaries are nonexistent. At age 12, when those repressed memories all came flooding back, I waged war on my body convinced it was something I did to cause this to happen. For years, I refused to touch myself but allowed others to touch me. I was paying the most backward-ass penance for something that was never my fault. So how do you begin to build from a foundation so toxic? By uprooting.

While listening to *The Sexually Liberated Woman* podcast, the host Evyan Whitney spoke of writing a letter to her younger self highlighting all she wished others would've told her. Mine started small. I wish someone would've told me it's okay to explore my body. I wish someone would've shared how someone is supposed to touch you. I wish someone would've listened and told me it wasn't my fault. That good touch, bad touch applies here and shared on consent and how it can be given and taken away. As my list grew, I began to notice a pattern: most of my deficiencies came from words unsaid and actions not taken. From my protectors and the adults in my life. So starting life over, erasing everything those same protectors injected into my psyche, takes meeting that curious little girl face-to-face. In this moment, I'm teaching her sex-ed. I'm

sitting her down and allowing her to explore with me; without fear. Our exploration involves books (*Pleasure Activism*, *The Vagina Bible*, *The Ethical Slut*, third edition) It involves finding a sweet spot in porn viewing, seeking out women-curated and directed porn that centers the woman vs appealing to the male gaze. It involves direct self-activation where I look at my vulva with adoration instead of disgust. There are days it feels insurmountable. That unlearning these toxic sex + sexuality beliefs will be a battle I was always just barely be on the winning side of. Being honest with yourself that this is hard, that it's a journey that requires regression for progression. To come to terms with all I don't know or are unsure about.

### **Releasing Shame on the Daily**

Sexual shame is a real thing that's often cast aside as a typical coming-of-age trope. We see it viewed as humping a pie or getting our period or trying unsuccessfully to not be awkward during our first time. What usually isn't covered, is the religious and familial dogma that coats puberty and budding sexuality. I have an aunt who after she found out I was on birth control, proceeded to tell her daughter, my cousin who couldn't hold water, that I now had carte-blanche to hoe around. Me, a shy, bookish teenager dreaming of sex but not seeking it out, felt ashamed. Neither she or I knew what I was battling was Endometriosis, an incurable disease that single-handedly made me anemic. I went on birth control after one too many instances of finding myself screaming on the bathroom floor covered in clots and in writhing agony. But the shame of being told I was somehow this whore for audaciously not wanting to be doubled over in pain every month stuck with me. I couldn't bring myself to try tampons because God forbid I like the sensation and proceed to hump the box, so imagine me getting acquainted with dilators. As a part of my physical therapy as a young bride, I was given a shiny box filled with vaginal dilators. These hard, white, plastic phallics came as a Russian doll of intimidation. Every other week, I was challenged with upping my size tolerance while simultaneously reminding my body that this exercise was one of love and not coercion. My therapist stood over me as the probe inside me monitored my stress levels and muscle tension. "Breathe, Joi", she'd say. "You got this. You're doing so well". Positive self-talk, especially as a sexual trauma survivor has been a work-in-progress. Some words feel awkward leaving my lips. Worthy. Deserving. Unashamed. In her book *Pussy Prayers*, Black Girl Bliss shares how our relationship to shame directly affects our ability to receive pleasure and release any and all hang-ups attached to that pleasure. For me, receiving pleasure always went hand-and-hand with receiving pain. Not good pain, such as consensual BDSM play, but pain via trauma. The trauma of being abused coupled with the severity of rejection and abandonment drug me down into a dark space where I couldn't release the shame. Shame was comfortable. So was victimhood. And wrapping myself in bubble wrap masquerading as a safety blanket made sure shame stayed insulated with me. Listen as I say this: there's no shame here - sex isn't shameful. Sex is a divine act with the power to manifest new realities into existence. I even dare to posit that with every orgasm, you gain an inch - a sensual growth spurt, if you will. Physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual violence and trauma can

make self-pleasure almost impossible. Disengaging from the thoughts and words that trigger shame of our bodies, kinks, desires, pleasures and destigmatizing what self-pleasure means for us will break those chains of shame around us. During trauma, we are taught by word and deed that our bodies are not our own. That they are playgrounds on which awful people can swing from our physical and metaphysical bodies whenever they wish. In this, we learn how to disengage, how to ignore the pangs, how to be numb. Shame steals our power. We now take that power back.

### **Taking Back Our Pleasure**

Most folks with vulvas have been told that their pleasure resides with someone else. That we are incapable of giving ourselves pleasure because who are we to deny anyone what's between our thighs? It's a selfish act to exclude others from partaking in a space they deem is theirs to plunder. I can pinpoint the first time I brought myself to near-orgasm, edging if you will. It was a moment when my now ex-husband was away and I built up the courage to purchase a vibrator. Then, I still had no true understanding of what my body did outside of daily and monthly functions. Again, this is what happens when you allow purity culture and abstinence-only teachings to take precedence. What happens when you leave questions to hang in the air like shame-shaped Dollar Tree balloons - deflating and brooding. This is what happens when you tell yourself God will only love you through sainthood. Anyway, I laid out a whole scene. My daughter was away at the babysitter's and he was headed home. I had bought my vibe with the express interest of saving it for both of us. But with my curiosity piqued, I made my way down to a place I'd seldom explored. I started on low because I'd heard the stories. The tales of people cumming too hard and fast and then the night is ruined. So I started slow and for the first time felt what it must be like to breathe through every pore. I stopped myself from going too far (even though my body was begging me to keep going), because surely this is selfish. That's a lie borne out of the gnarled recesses of misogyny and patriarchy. Because enjoying sex with or without someone is an act of divine defiance. We've been convinced that the only way to enjoy sex is through someone else who takes the lead. That move they taught you feels good, even under the haze of abuse and neglect. The brain will be tricked into believing only this person can bring this pleasure and all the other bad sides will just need to be tolerated. It's affliction dressed as affection and we've all fallen for the ruse. Or, if not harm is present, that this person and them alone can get us to that screaming orgasm. And when they can't or won't, we're left thinking there's something wrong with us and, often, the other person begins to believe that too. Let me explain why this cycle needs to be destroyed:

No one deserves that much pressure, well-intentioned or not.

No one has every single sexual answer. What works for others may not work for you. That doesn't mean you're broken, it simply means you're you and more exploration is needed.

Our bodies change. They adapt. They shrink and grow. The person who sees all this happening in real-time: you. Therefore, your pleasure is always in your hands, literally and figuratively. We

may instruct others how we liked to be pleased, but we don't hand over control of our pleasure to them to take the reins. No more fake moans and orgasms. No more laying quietly hoping they hit the right spot. We know our spots as we are intimate with them regularly. We are vocal. We are direct. We center our bodies as we maneuver this new level of self-awareness.

### **Self-Intimacy = self-care.**

What do you believe about self-pleasure? When's the last time you craved your own touch? Can you pinpoint a moment you blushed under your own hand, allowing waves of passion to spill from you? If you can't, let's begin to carve out why and a way forward. Many of us, especially if you grew up in some semblance of the Black church, are intimate with some version of crossing our legs at the knees and ankles. Most of us have been told by the very audacity of having a body, we have the ability to send a man straight to hell. With that knowledge comes the command to shield ourselves for the sainthood of men, whether we are attracted to them or not. We are walking footholds embodied of sin. How dare you also explore that body with sumptuous abandon. Becoming intimate with yourself directly bucks the societal standards baked into having a vulva. Yes, feels can wax and wane. From embarrassment to guilt to euphoria. But becoming intimate with yourself is a road traveled, abandoned and then traveled again. Healing isn't linear. Neither is self-discovery. And self-intimacy leads the back in how up and down this self-reverence work can be. Honestly, though, the only person available to change the narrative is you. It can be as small as wearing lingerie on a regular day to no one else's delight but your own. It can be as big as building your arsenal of toys for the express intention of pleasing you into slumber. How you enact your self-intimacy is totally up to you. Reconfiguring this thinking comes with pulling out the drawer and emptying everything on the table. Coming to terms that what felt good to you before you started this work may not feel as good now, while things you never thought would bring you release are now your go-tos. Any work that you do towards seeking/redeeming/reclaiming pleasure after trauma is a work of discovery. We are constantly in a space of unhooking ourselves from calamitous mainframes and unlearning what's been taught. Give yourself the grace to work through this as you need to. Don't rush, take your time, but definitely don't run from what this healing and work is trying to bring to you.

### **Don't Run From It**

We often aren't aware that we run from the good things until they're already in our rearview. Sometimes it's an act of rebellion, other times it's in response to fear. By design, we navigate the world tactilely. In applying that ability, we now seek to navigate our bodies by form of what nourishes us. From how you apply your daily oils to the foods you eat to the sheets you lay in at night, begin to treat all times of touching your body as sacred. Because it is. Our bodies will begin to respond differently to stimuli that are rooted in love + pleasure. Allowing yourself the grace to work through these emotions in real-time - not running away when they get too intense - helps them to stick to what and where they need to. When it comes to actually exploring your

body sensually, I would suggest using your hands as your default tools as you feel comfortable. A bit of body disconnection/dysmorphia is attached to solo sex after trauma using our hands. Vulvas are a tad more intricate and they unfairly carry more shame. We laugh about jacking off. We grimace at flicking the bean. When you think of vulva-havers self-pleasuring, we often imagine a giant, phallic-shaped device. We rarely think of lube, fingers, and hands. I believe that the latter is astronomically hotter and a much better exercise in reconnection. It's understandable why there may be some aversion, so please don't feel bad not being fully comfortable touching yourself with just your hands yet. Start slow. Linger over your folds as you wash yourself. Grab that hand mirror and discover all your vulva has to show you. Knowing how to better love and touch ourselves, we do better by ourselves - mind, body, and soul.

Since naming and reclaiming my body after trauma and even before, I've had good sex. I haven't been fully present, but the parts I do remember were good. Dissociating during sex is something I'm actively working through in both CBT and sex therapy. Because I truly do believe I'm on the verge of my own sexual renaissance. That there is a truly genuine, funny, enjoyable side to sex that doesn't involve body pain, trauma, and coercion. That consent is sexy af and being the best person to get me off is an electrifying ability. Where room is made for conversations varying in seriousness. Because really, we are capable of being the best lays we've ever had.